

Bhakta Salabeg

By: Sujit Mahapatra



Puri Temple, Odisha

Salabega was born into a Muslim father and Brahmin mother in the 17th Century Odisha. His father *Lal Beg* alias *Jahangir Quli Khan* was a military officer in the Mughal army under Jahangir. Lalbeg forcefully abducted and then married *Lalita*, *Salbeg's* mother during one of his raids on Odisha to attack *Jagannath* temple of *Puri*. Lalita never relinquished her Hindu faith even if she was married to a non-hindu. Even though *Salabeg* was muslim by religion, he was hindu by sentiment, specially due to his mother's teachings during his childhood. *Salabeg* learned about Lord *Krishna* and Lord *Jagannath* from his mother, and his devotion toward *Krishna* started very early in his life.

In medieval India, the Muslim rulers and invaders were extremely ruthless. Their aim was to conquer as much land as possible by force. Those muslim rulers believed in demolishing Hindu idols and temples and convert Hindus, in order to eradicate Hinduism from India, and establish India as an islamic state. *Salabeg* started in the Mughal Army just like his father and was gravely injured during a battle. He was bed ridden for many days. Despite top level care and medicines, his wounds will not heal. He prayed to *Krishna bhagwan* to cure him as advised by

his mother. Miraculously he was cured. This made him dedicate his life to the devotion of Lord *Krishna*.

Salabega wrote many devotional poems to celebrate *Radha* and *Krishna*. *Salabega* did not forget to celebrate any aspect of the immortal love affair of *Radha* and *Krishna*. The beauty of *Radha* and the glamor of *Krishna* have been variously depicted in the poems written by him. Multiple moods of the lovers have been harped on. Sometimes *Radhika* burns within with a deep sense of hurt born out of love (*abhimani*) and refuses even to look at the face of the naughty *Krishna*. *Salabega's* bhajan is an amazing celebration of the immortal love between *Radha* and *Krishna*. It is as though the gods and goddesses were made to realize the significance of human relationships, human bondages. Situations of separation, misunderstanding, teasing, suspecting, and doting and wooing all these human aspects involved in love have been so candidly portrayed that one cannot but appreciate the ingenuity of *Salabega's* intuitive study of the human psyche.

When *Salabega's* faith in *Lord Krishna* deepened, a saint advised him to visit *Srikshetra* or *Puri*. Inspired by the saint's words, *Salabega* went to *Puri*, but he was denied access to the temple because non-Hindus were not allowed to enter *Puri Jagannath Temple*. When *Salabega* was detained at the gate, he wept inconsolably and prayed to the lord to see his face. Standing there at the gate, warm tears rolled down his cheeks, his lips trembling with prayers. At last the heart of the Lord melted away. So he could not remain inside the temple when a devotee was weeping at the gate. He appeared at the gate to render darshan to *Salabega*. After this meeting *Salabega* was certain that there existed no difference between his Lord *Krishna* and Lord *Jagannath*. After this heart-stirring incident, an idol of the Lord was installed at the Lion's gate of the temple for the non-Hindus to have darshan and the mercy of the Lord. The statue at the gate is still in place and can be seen from the *Aruna stambha* or the monolithic stone pillar in front of the temple. *Salabega* kept praying to Lord *Jaganath* and wrote many poems or prayers for him. His bhajan "*Ahe Nila Saila*" is considered one of the greatest bhajan written on *Jagannath*. Prayers written by him are used for devotion to gods throughout Odisha.



Patita Pabana Jagannath view from Aruna Stamba

In another instance, *Salabega* was in *Vrindavana* when he learned that *Jagannath Rath Yatra* was not very far away. He knew that this was his chance to see the actual figure of Lord *Jagannath*. So without wasting any time *Salabega* started off from *Vrindavan* to *Srikhetra Puri* on foot. On the way he felt exhausted, so to draw inspiration, he wrote the famous prayer “*Jagabandhu he Gosain*”. *Salabega* took very little rest on his way, but was still not in *Puri* when the world famous *Rath Yatra* started. But miraculously, *Jagannath’s rath (chariot)* stopped on the way. In spite of many people trying to pull the cart, having elephants to help, all *Bhajana* and *Kirtana*, *Nandighosha* (the cart of Lord *Jagannath*) refused to move. Only after *Salabega* reached *Puri*, the chariot started moving. All other devotees were astonished at this event, and started calling *Salabega* as the greatest devotee of Lord *Jagannath*. As it is said in odia “*Bhakta pain Bhagaban*”, the god is always with his devotee. God always takes care of those who surrender their lives to the lord.

Salabega spent the rest of his life in *Puri*, writing devotional songs to praise the Lord. After *Salabeg’s* death, his *Samadhi* (grave) was erected on *Badadanda* (Grand Trunk Road) of

Puri, and a small temple was created on the grave near the *Balagandi Chata Matha*. Every year during *Ratha Yatra*, the chariots take a break in front of his *Samadhi* to pay tribute to the great devotee of the Lord. Even if *Salabeg* was not a Hindu by religion, his legacy as a great worshiper of *Jagannath* far exceeds many hindus. His legacy is unprecedented, proving that devotion is above all religious beliefs. *Salabega* himself referred to himself as a Muslim, but still surrendered himself to Lord *Jagannath*. As the phrases of his poem goes, “*Kahe Salabega hina jati re mu jabana, Sriranga Charana tale karu achi Janana....*”. Which means, “I am *Salabega*, a Muslim by religion, I am praying to the lotus feet of Lord *Jagannath*”.

Some of the best Jana or prayers of bhakta *Salabega* are,

- *Jagabandhu he gosain, tumbha sri charana binu anya gati nahin*
- *Chala Sakhi Ambhe Darshana Kariba, Nila Giri Kalia Ku.....*
- *Aahe Nila Shaila; Prabala matta barana*
- *Kahinki Asichu Mana, Kisha Naba Pain Re*
- And many more

Through the life of *Salabega* one can understand the importance of devotion in life. Devotion is one of the gists of *Bhagwat Gita* as well, also known as *Bhakti Yoga*. *Salabega* was a staunch devotee of Lord *Jagannath*. Devotion made him transcend the boundaries of religion and produce some of the best devotional literature of Odia. We all should learn from the life of *Salabega* that to understand the god, his greatness, devotion and complete surrender is the easiest way. By completely surrendering oneself, we can therefore cross the human boundaries and experience the divine. Even now, when one hears a *Bhajana* of *Salabega*, his/her heart is filled with love, and with containment. We are all but thankful to the great souls like *Salabega* who have led the way for us all, to follow the path of worship. Being a son of a Tyrant, whose purpose was to destroy hindu faith, *Salabega* became one of the brightest stars towards conserving and spreading the glory of hindu gods like *Jagannath* and *Krishna*. The *leela* of god is indeed beyond all of us!

Reference:

- '*Salabeg A Great Muslim Devotee Of Lord Jagannatha*' by Chandan Yatra Das, 2021
- '*Salabega*' by Mohanty Niranjana, 1996
- 'ଉତ୍କଳକବି ସାଲବେଗ: ଜୀବନୀ ଓ ପଦ୍ୟାବଳୀ' by Nilamani Mishra, 1966